

Population Growth and Foreign Policy

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Following is a statement by Ambassador Richard Elliot Benedick, Coordinator of Population Affairs and U.S. Representative to the U.N. Population Commission, before a meeting of the commission in New York on January 27, 1981.

The United States is pleased to participate in the important work of this distinguished gathering of demographic experts and population policymakers. We would like to express our appreciation to the secretariat for the excellent background papers, which will greatly facilitate our deliberations in the coming days.

The World Population Plan of Action, which is a central focus to this commission's work, is considered by the United States to be an important landmark in international consensus. Our work in measuring trends in population policies and programs against the thoughtful guidelines of the World Population Plan of Action has profound significance for the political and economic aspirations of nations.

I would recall to the distinguished delegates that, at the time of the last meeting of this commission in early 1979, there existed no mention of population and demographic factors in the early drafts of the International Development Strategy for the U.N. Third Decade of Development—the basic strategy document for the 1980s. It was as a result of a resolution of this commission, subsequently endorsed by the Economic and Social Council, that a coalition of concerned governments, in a heartening demonstration of North-South cooperation, was able over the en-

suing months to place meaningful language on these vital population issues in the final version of the international development strategy.

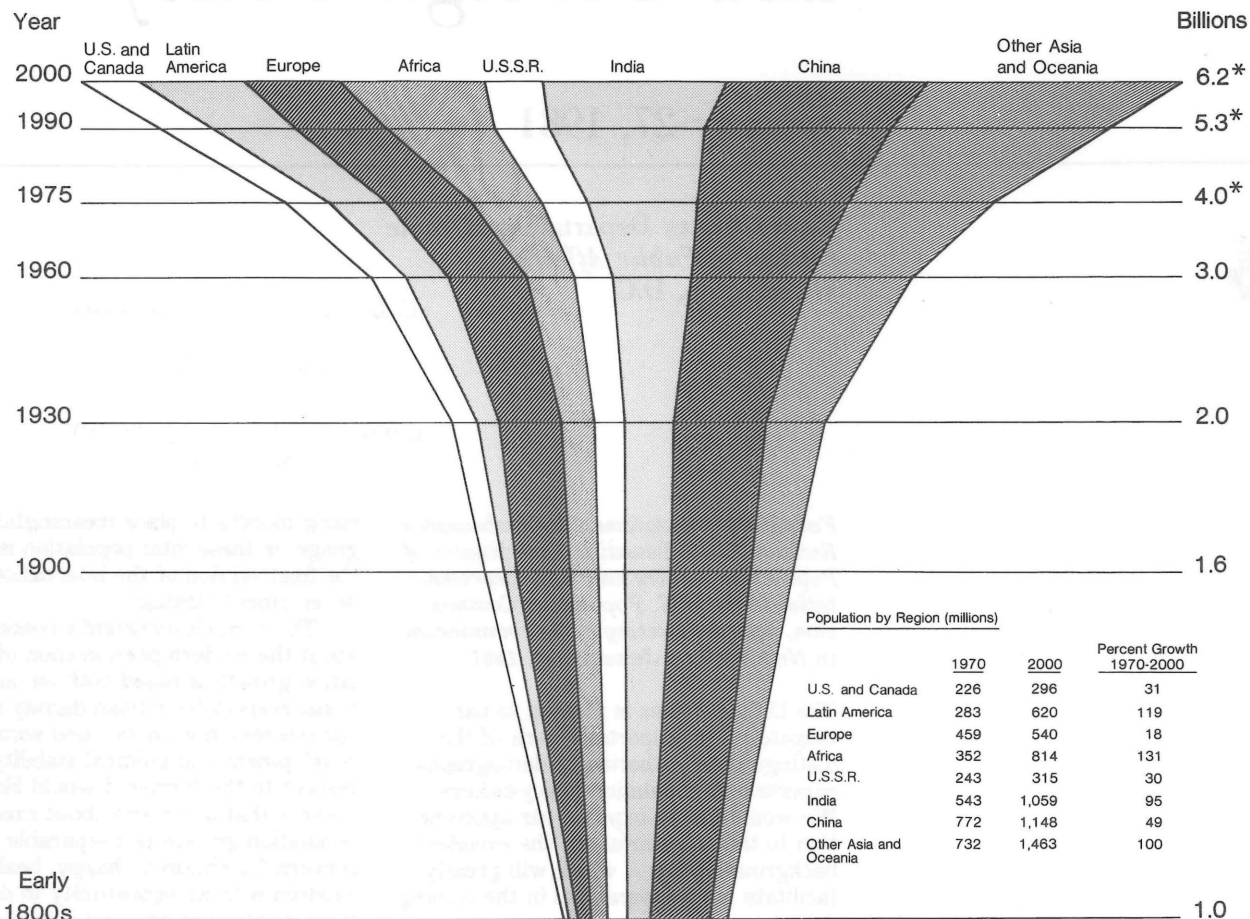
The U.S. Government's concern about the modern phenomenon of population growth is based both on our traditional respect for human dignity and on our interest in economic and social development and political stability. With respect to the former, I would like to observe that a concern about excessive population growth is inseparable from a concern for children—happy, healthy children with an opportunity to develop their mental and physical potential. In our proper attention to the quality of human life, we cannot be blind to the realities of the effects of the historically unprecedented population growth which the world is currently experiencing. I need only cite in this connection studies of the World Health Organization on the effects of excessive fertility on the health of both mothers and children, as well as the millions of unwanted children being abandoned each year by parents unable to support them.

The United States reaffirms our endorsement of resolutions at Bucharest, Colombo, and other international conferences which stress the basic human right of couples to determine the size of their families and the corollary responsibility of governments to provide couples with the information, education, and means to make such decisions.

We are also impressed with the implications of continuing high levels of population growth on the process of economic and social development. For example, in many parts of the world population growth is outstripping food

The Population Explosion

Where the People Are Likely to be in the Year 2000



* U.N. medium projection variant

production. Soil erosion and the disappearance of forests, resulting in large part from continuing population pressures, are adding further to the dimensions of the food problem. Unemployment and underemployment, already at unacceptably high levels, will be aggravated by hundreds of millions of new entrants on the labor market in the next two decades. The rise of crowded megacities, as documented in the recent Rome Conference on Population and the Urban Future, will bring hitherto unimagined problems and increase the potential for social unrest. We see all of these factors, associated with the underlying demographic reality, as undermining development efforts and threatening the basic stability of nations.

For all of these reasons, the U.S. Government, under both Republican and Democratic Administrations, has been at the forefront in assisting countries in implementing population policies and in support of the U.N. fund for population activities. I reaffirm the continuing high priority of population in U.S. policy. We also accord high priority to research in reproductive physiology and in developing safer, more effective and acceptable methods of fertility regulation, and I would include in this connection the natural family-planning methods just cited by the distinguished observer from the Holy See. But I would emphasize that my government fully recognizes that the primary responsibility for ad-

ressing these issues rightly rests ultimately in the national will and actions of each sovereign country.

The U.S. Government notes with regret that, based on current trends, the goals of the World Population Plan of Action concerning infant mortality and global life expectancy at birth (62 years by 1985) are unlikely to be achieved.

Another area of growing concern, well documented in the secretariat report, is that "never in human history has there been such a discrepancy between the supply of and the demand for international migration." This situation brings "unprecedented problems" for the governments of the receiving countries. In recent years, legal immigration alone has accounted for about 20% of the U.S. population growth. The volume of illegal

flows into the United States is unknown and the subject of widely differing estimates. In addition, in the past 5 years our nation has received more than 600,000 refugees for resettlement, a number that dwarfs the figure for any other country.

It is clear that the political, economic, and social conditions generating massive migratory flows may continue and may even become more acute. There is a growing awareness in the United States of the need for review of the principles behind current policy in this area.

The United States considers the information presented on the global decline in fertility and in population growth rates to be an encouraging development. We note that these favorable trends have been, to a great extent, furthered by effective implementation of national population and family-planning policies. I believe that the global community understands much more now than a decade ago about how enlightened public policy can encourage and support voluntary family decisions which have the effect of reducing fertility. In this context, I would urge that this report focus greater attention on which countries have experienced the largest fertility declines and what policies they have followed and found effective.

I cannot overemphasize that, heartening as recent trends may be, there is absolutely no cause for complacency. In this, I agree most emphatically with the comments of the distinguished delegates from Norway and India. Fertility in many areas remains excessive, and the demographic momentum confronting us in the closing years of this century is very real. Much more needs to be done, rapidly and with a sense of urgency, to confront this problem.

The results of the World Fertility Survey tell us that there is a great unsatisfied demand in most countries of the world for the knowledge and means to reduce fertility. The governments concerned and the international community must take notice of this critical need and act to respond to it.

It is important to realize that what we do today can have tangible results in the not-too-distant future. A few months ago, I called together a group of demographers from several institutions to examine the impact of a significant acceleration of family-planning efforts. I would like to submit to this distinguished commission the preliminary results, and invite comments and testing of the data.

In brief, we asked the demographers what would be the effect on the total world population by the year 2000, if usage of contraceptive techniques in the

Third World could be doubled—that is, from the current estimated 25% to approximately half of the eligible couples—by the end of this decade. According to these demographic models, the results could be a world population half a billion smaller in the year 2000 than the currently estimated 6.2 billion-6.3 billion. Moreover, this acceleration of family-planning programs would mean the eventual stabilized world population in the next century could be approximately 8 billion, instead of more than 12 billion—a difference in number which is almost equivalent to the total population of the world today!

I believe that these numbers indicate that substantial efforts by national governments now can have meaningful results. Looking at the papers prepared for this meeting, one cannot help but feel that the world today is at an awesome watershed in the history of humanity on this planet. This generation bears a particularly heavy responsibility, and time is not on our side. ■

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